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# Fresno's Hmong farmers stung by freeze

With few resources to fall back on, Fresno's Southeast Asian farmers were especially hard hit by this winter's freeze. The city is stepping in to help.

By Steve Chawkins, Times Staff Writer  
February 26, 2007



PHOTO GALLERY  
Farmers stung by freeze

FRESNO — Trudging down the wilted rows of his leased 10 acres last week, Fong Tchang stooped and broke off a brown stalk of dead sugar cane. "Doesn't smell sweet, does it?" he asked in his native Hmong. "Smells more like wine."

The sugar cane was blasted in last month's historic deep freeze, along with rows of eggplant, *tong ho* soup greens, cabbages, strawberries, artichokes, a cornucopia of Asian squashes and lemongrass, a Hmong staple. Withered Chinese yams lay in brown piles outside the tattered plastic tenting that was supposed to have protected them from the plunging temperatures. Tchang snapped off a stalk of broccoli covered with raw patches of what looked like freezer burn.

"Tastes horrible," he said.

Like hundreds of other small farmers whose fields dot sprawling Fresno, Tchang lost well more than half his crop to the freeze. But unlike larger, more established growers, farmers such as Tchang have no cushion — no crop insurance and no savings for the seed and equipment they need to keep going.

"This is their Katrina," said Fresno City Councilman Jerry Duncan. "They need to plant, and they need to do it now."

Blong Xiong, who last year became the first Hmong elected to the City Council, said he had been swamped by requests for aid from the city's mostly Hmong small farmers.

"The community is going through some very difficult times," he said. "People talk about the urgency."

To help subsistence farmers who, in many cases, lost more than 80% of their crop, the Fresno council last week set aside \$500,000 for no-interest loans that might be available in just a week or two.

It was an unusual action for a city accustomed to agriculture's ups and downs, but it reflected Fresno's unusual relationship with the thousands of Southeast Asians who over the last generation came as refugees and have settled in as residents.

"No people embody loyalty like the Hmong," said Mayor Alan Autry, who cited their support of U.S. troops in the Vietnam War. "They're just hard-working people who don't complain. It's an honor to help them."

More than 32,000 Hmong and thousands of other Southeast Asian immigrants live in Fresno, where a radio station broadcasts weekly farm reports in Hmong. A statue outside the downtown courthouse depicts a Hmong soldier and a Lao soldier — clad in khakis and toting automatic weapons — helping a U.S. airman downed in combat. It sits in a tree-shaded square along with a veterans memorial, a tribute to fallen police officers and a bust of Martin Luther King Jr.

More populous than Miami, Fresno has become home to waves of Hmong immigrants who had languished for years in Thai refugee camps after the Vietnam War. They had fled their mountain villages in Laos, where thousands had been recruited by the CIA to combat communist troops. Even now, a largely Hmong apartment complex in Fresno is known on the street as "Ban Vanai," after a massive refugee settlement in Thailand.

Farmers such as Chia Lee left the camps half a lifetime ago; but, after the freeze, they need whatever help they can get now.

"The freeze was terrible," said Lee, who with about 15 relatives works 16 acres of peanuts, cherry tomatoes, green onions and Japanese long beans. "I don't have a tractor, I can't afford extra labor and I don't have money for chemicals."

With assistance from family members, Lee, who was laid off from a computer job several years ago, had managed to buy a house. But he said he's up to his neck in credit card debt and still feels the sting of losing \$20,000 when his cherry tomato seedlings failed to bear fruit two years ago.

The cherry tomato debacle cost Lee and 22 other Hmong farmers more than \$3.6 million. The same year, scammers writing bad checks hit 13 Lao farmers for nearly \$100,000, and two dozen Hmong were out \$400,000 when a packinghouse went under.

Although federal programs make disaster aid available to many growers, officials said many of the small Southeast Asian farmers fall between the cracks.

"Quite a few don't have the credit history to qualify for traditional loans," said Richard Molinar, a University of California farm advisor who works extensively with small farmers in Fresno. "They're living day by day, week by week."

Drawing on memories of persecution in Laos, many also are wary of government programs. Early on, some of their traditional practices — such as animal sacrifices for religious purposes — strained relations with authorities. Even the custom of *pauv zog* — swapping hours of labor with relatives — has raised alarms among state officials, who have sued some farmers for allegedly evading workers' compensation rules, according to LoXing Kiatoukaysi, director of a nonprofit agency called the Hmong American Community Inc.

"It's very frustrating," said Kiatoukaysi, a Hmong immigrant who was a dental technician and financial analyst before taking his current job. "It's ridiculous."

The no-interest, 10-year loans from the city will provide a maximum of \$20,000 per farmer. Once the program is up and running, it should be able to draw additional funds from private lenders, said Stanley Tom, vice president of the Valley Small Business Development Corp., the project's administrator.

Tom said the applications would be kept as simple as possible. Applying for comparable federal aid is a cumbersome process, he said, requiring multiple forms along with five years' worth of records on income, expenses, projections and verifications. Approvals can take as long as 60 days.

"We're interested in helping people who don't qualify for other loans, people who wonder how they're going to get the next crop into the ground," Tom said.

Federal officials in Fresno said their forms are not onerous and that assistance is available for farmers who have trouble speaking English or understanding the application.

Whatever its source, the help will be good news for farmer Tchang, who has two children at home and two attending college on scholarships.

Asked whether he wanted any of his children to become farmers, he burst into laughter.

It was the funniest thing he had heard all day.

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